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FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2729
USDOC WASHDC 7934
DEPT OF TREASURY WASHINGTON DC
CIA WASHINGTON DC//DDI/OEA//
USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI//FPA//
SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
DIA WASHINGTON DC//DB-Z//

UNCLAS SEOUL 002453

DEPT FOR EAP/K, EAP/PD, INR/EAP/K AND INR/IL/P
TREASURY FOR OASIA/WINGLE
USDOC FOR 4430/IEP/OPB/EAP/WGOLICKE
STATE PASS USDA ELECTRONICALLY FOR FAS/ITP
STATE PASS DOL/ILAB SUDHA HALEY
STATE PASS USTR FOR IVES/WEISEL

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TAGS: KPAO PGOV PREL MARR ECON KS US
SUBJECT: PRESS BULLETIN - December 22, 2008

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Domestic Developments

¶1. According to a senior ROKG official, Seoul is sounding out North Korea about holding behind-the-scenes talks through various channels. It has delivered to the U.S., Japan and China its expectations for a change in relations with North Korea in the spring. The senior ROKG official was quoted as saying: "North Korea doesn't always maintain a hard-line stance on the ROK. We've been told through various channels that the North's position has become more flexible." (Chosun)

International News

¶1. According to the Voice of America (VOA), Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice allegedly said during a Dec. 19 (local time) speech at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR): "No one trusts the North Koreans. You'd have to be an idiot to trust the North Koreans."

That's why we have a verification protocol that we are negotiating."
(Chosun, SBS)

¶12. With North Korea reporting on a series of visits by North Korean leader Kim Jong-il to various facilities amid allegations of his ill health, ROK and U.S. intelligence authorities are said to be judging that it is highly likely that the North Korean leader has actually visited such facilities using his personal train. (Chosun)

¶13. According to Radio Free Asia, 19 North Korean defectors will stand trial in Myanmar as early as today on charges of illegally entering the country. They were arrested while en route to the ROK from China earlier this month. (Chosun)

¶14. Adm. Mike Mullen, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters in Kabul, Afghanistan on Dec. 20 (local time) that between 20,000 and 30,000 additional U.S. troops could be sent to Afghanistan to bolster the 31,000 already there. (JoongAng, Hankook, Hankyoreh, Segye, Seoul, MBC) This development seems likely to lead to increased U.S. calls for Seoul to send troops to the war-torn country. (JoongAng, MBC)

¶15. The U.S. is reportedly conducting "war-gaming simulations" in the event of an emergency in North Korea. (Dong-a)

Media Analysis

North Korea

Conservative Chosun Ilbo and SBS, a private broadcasting network, replayed a Voice of America (VOA) report quoting Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as allegedly saying during a Dec. 19 (local time) speech at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR): "No one trusts the North Koreans. You'd have to be an idiot to trust the North Koreans. That's why we have a verification protocol that we are negotiating."

Conservative Chosun Ilbo reported on its front page, quoting a senior ROKG official, that Seoul is seeking behind-the-scenes dialogue with North Korea through various channels. Chosun went on to say that Seoul has told the U.S., Japan and China that it hopes a change will happen in relations with the North in the spring. Chosun quoted the ROKG official again, noting that: "North Korea doesn't always maintain a hard-line stance on the ROK. We've been told through various channels that the North's position has become more flexible."

Afghanistan

Most of the ROK media reported on press remarks by Adm. Mike Mullen, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, in Kabul, Afghanistan on Dec. 20 (local time) that between 20,000 and 30,000 additional U.S. troops could be sent to Afghanistan to bolster the 31,000 already there. Right-of-center JoongAng Ilbo and MBC, a public broadcaster, viewed this development as likely to lead to increased U.S. calls for Seoul to send troops to the war-torn country.

In a related development, left-leaning Hankyoreh Shinmun editorialized on Saturday (Dec. 20): "The U.S. invaded Iraq without any legal or procedural justification, and the ROK's Zaytun unit was dispatched to the Iraq war in this context. This was a fatal mistake which debased the quality of our alliance with the U.S. and considerably undermined the identity of our foreign policy under the name of the ROK-U.S. alliance. The U.S. is reportedly asking for the deployment of Korean troops to Afghanistan directly and indirectly. What happened in the Iraq war is being repeated in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it is said that the ROKG is failing to flatly deny the U.S. request and is just watching the situation. This would not have been the case if Seoul had learned even a small lesson from its troop dispatch to Iraq."

Opinions/Editorials

Wrong Troop Dispatch Should Never Be Repeated
(Hankyoreh Shinmun, December 20, Page 27)

The Zaytun Unit completely withdrew from Iraq yesterday. Now is the

time to stop justifying the troop dispatch in a far-fetched way but to find a lesson with a cool-headed reflection.

The ROK troops produced good results in Iraq through various activities. We hope that their assistance has provided big help to local residents. It is also worth mentioning that the Zaytun Unit finished its mission with no casualties of physical conflicts.

However, this partial accomplishment cannot smooth over the fundamental error. First of all, the deployment was in the nature of participation in the aggressive war. The U.S. invaded Iraq without any legal or procedural justification, and the Zaytun Unit was dispatched in this context. This was a fatal mistake which debased the quality of the alliance and considerably undermined the identity of the ROK's foreign policy under the name of the ROK-U.S. alliance. The fact that the ROK sent combat troops for non-combat missions clearly reveals that it was an unjustifiable troop dispatch. After the dispatch, despite opposition from a majority of the people, Seoul extended the troop deployment four times in the process of "expansive reproduction" of errors. One of the results was the kidnapping of 23 Koreans in Afghanistan last year.

If the troop deployment was aimed at helping rebuild Iraq and strengthening friendship with locals, Seoul should have sent a civilian team. The Zaytun Unit spent a budget of over 700 billion won, but only one tenth of it was invested in reconstruction. Most of the money was used to maintain the unit in a highly inefficient way. Still, if the ROKG claims that it had "set the model of a civilian operation," it is tantamount to deceiving the people who paid taxes. By joining the invasion of Iraq, the ROK gained an image as a participant in the invasion of Iraq and caused a severe national division. This is also an immeasurable loss.

The U.S. is reportedly asking for the deployment of ROK troops to Afghanistan directly and indirectly. What happened in the Iraqi war is being repeated in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it is said that the ROKG is failing to flatly deny the U.S. request but is just watching the situation. This would not have been the case if Seoul had learned even a small lesson from its troop dispatch to Iraq.

Features

Former U.S. Ambassador Vershbow: "In Case of Kim Jong-il's Death, Reform and Opening-up Will Be Accelerated... The ROK Should Prepare for North Korea Contingency"
(Dong-a Ilbo, December 22, 2008, Page 8)

By Washington Correspondent Ha Tae-won

Former U.S. Ambassador to the ROK Vershbow gave his first interview since retirement.

Mr. Vershbow: "The Obama Administration will maintain the large framework of the Six-Party Talks.

A rapprochement between the leaders of the ROK and the U.S. is more important than the timing of their meeting.

Former ROK President Roh is a maverick thinking beyond common sense."

"North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-il will die sooner or later, and the ROK should prepare for contingency in North Korea."

Former U.S. Ambassador to the ROK Alexander Vershbow made the statement during an interview at the U.S. branch of Dong-a Ilbo in the National Press Building, Washington, on December 16. He also stated, "In the light of my experience in Europe, the death of a dictator accelerates reform and opening-up and improves the people's quality of life. North Korea is not an exception."

He predicted, "No matter what changes may be made in the North Korean leadership, a new leader will not be able to ignore the people's quality of life and welfare as they do now, and the Kims' iron grip will not be possible."

IQ. During your term of office, North Korea conducted a nuclear test,

and there were discussions about the declaration to the end of the Korean War and a peace regime.

Q. North Korea's missile launches in July, 2006, were like an appetizer, and its nuclear test in October was like a main dish. (laughter) However, since North Korea's move on a nuclear test was detected in the summer of that year, I was not surprised at all, but instead, I was surprised that Pyongyang fired seven short-range and mid-to-long range missiles at the same time. Although the ROK offered many carrots, they did not serve as enough leverage. North Korean leader Kim Jong-il seemed to have already decided to launch missiles and conduct the nuclear test in the beginning of the year.

Q. How much progress has been made in the discussions about the declaration of the end of the war?

A. President George W. Bush considered declaring the end of the war as part of the discussions about a peace regime, if North Korea is completely denuclearized so that it may not have nuclear weapons, not to mention one gram of plutonium or enriched uranium. However, the Roh Moo-hyun Administration interpreted this creatively and tried to push for it as a separate event. This is why former President Roh repeatedly urged President Bush to clarify his statement further at the summit in Sydney in September 2007.

Q. Were there any specific discussions about the declaration of the end of the war?

A. The ROK and U.S. authorities agreed during the consultations that it is desirable to have dialogue about the declaration of the end of the war inside the Korean Peninsula. I think that Panmunjom is the most logical venue. Shuttling between the North and the South for dialogue was also proposed.

Q. If you describe former President Roh in one word...

A. I can say, "maverick," a popular expression in the U.S. This is because his opinion is stronger than those of his staff, and he often thinks beyond common sense. For a good example of this, he pushed for the ROK-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in the face of opposition from his support group. During the ROK-U.S. summit in Gyeongju, North Gyeongsang Province, in November, 2005, both leaders had a debate for more than an hour, and it ended in a tie.

Q. What do you think of the stalled Six-Party Talks?

A. Although the Barack Obama Administration will assess the Six-Party Talks as a whole, I think that its basic strategy and goal will be maintained. However, we need to think about whether we made too many concessions to the North in return for progress in the negotiations with North Korea. A lesson from failure to put a verification protocol into writing would be that if you deal with the North, you should have a written commitment, not a verbal promise.

Q. The ROK's role in Afghanistan is emerging as a pending issue in the ROK-U.S. alliance.

A. Under the current international system, no nation wants a free ride. As a nation which joined the ranks of leading nations by joining the G20 summit, the ROK needs to find the fields that it may contribute to on its own before other nations make a request. The ROK should look at its contribution to Afghanistan not with a sense of duty for the sake of the ROK-U.S. alliance but as a role of the world's leading nation.

Q. If you recommend an appropriate time for an ROK-U.S. summit...

A: No one knows what the most ideal timing is (for such a summit.) Generally speaking, it would be desirable to hold a summit after the current ROK administration and the incoming Obama Administration establish close cooperation at foreign and defense ministerial level following the Senate's confirmation of major Cabinet posts. The most important thing is how well they understand each other during their first meeting and not how fast they meet.